JAPAN'S MYTHICAL MARTIAL ARTS MASTERS

Did Winged Goblins Teach the Ninja and the Samurai?

by John Lindsey

The Japanese culture has always been strongly influenced by its rich folk beliefs and mythology. It is no wonder, then, that many of Japan's martial arts have their historical lineage based in myth and fantasy.

One of the most common mythical themes found in historical Japanese fighting systems is the connection with the winged goblins known as *tengu*. Countless martial arts, from sword-fighting styles to *ninjutsu*, have the tengu as part of their tradition. Even the famous swordsman Musashi Miyamoto is credited with having killed a tengu.

Living in mountain treetops, these half-crow, half-human goblins wreaked havoc on the lives of those who ran across them. Readily able to change themselves into human beings, they would kidnap children, destroy temples, or instigate wars for their own pleasure and gratification. As masters of the art of warfare, especially swordsmanship, they were also

Photo courtesy of John Lindsey

Tengu possibly originated from Buddhist guardian deities known as garuda (right). The scroll below depicts the human-like konoha tengu.

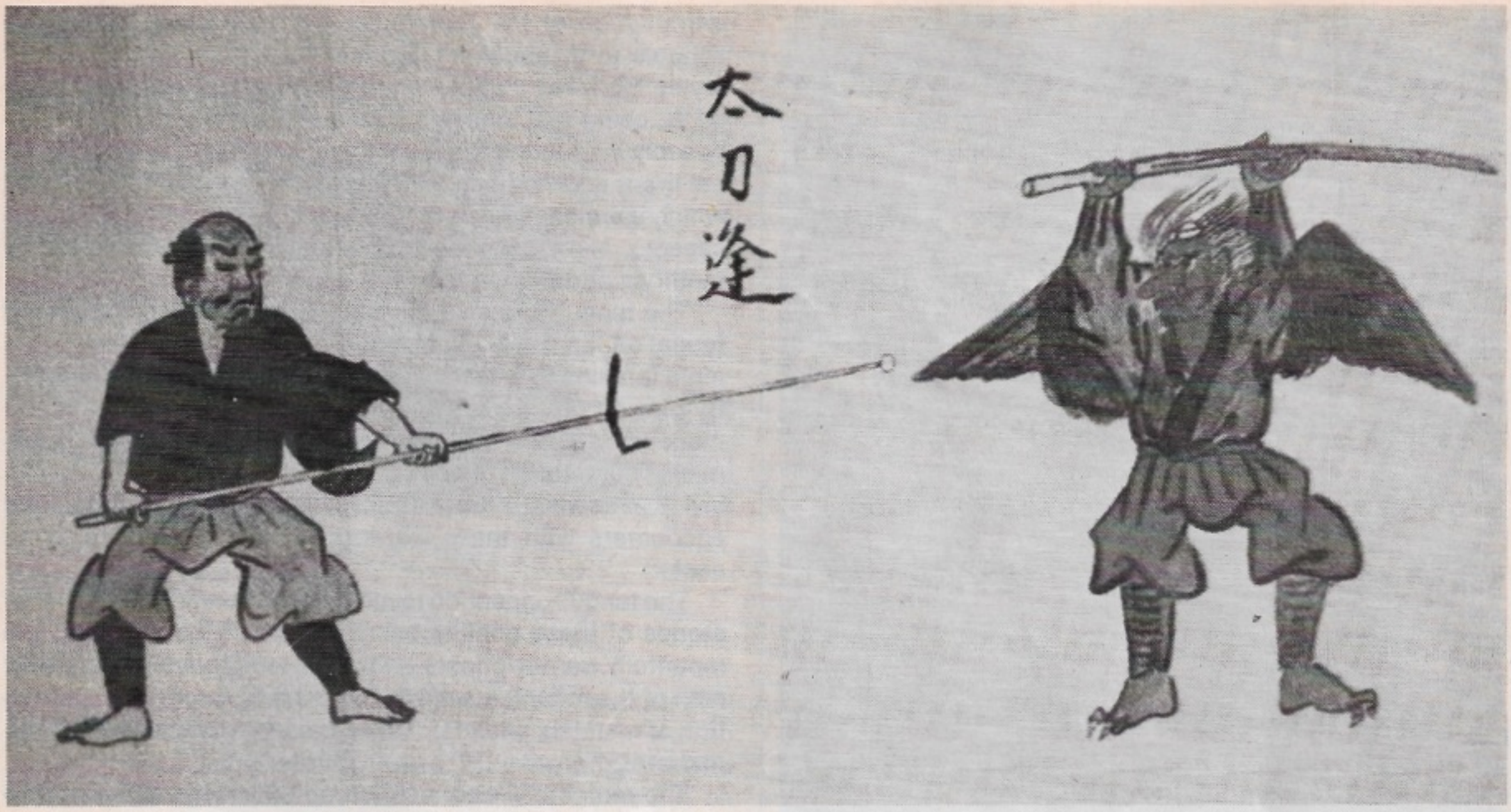


Photo courtesy of John Lindsey

Tengu were often depicted in makimano scrolls as sparring partners to illustrate a school's techniques.

known to have passed on their secrets to willing individuals who would aid their cause.

The exact origin of the tengu is shrouded in the mist of time and remains a mystery to this day. Many researchers feel tengu were a remnant of Chinese folklore which made its way to Japan during the sixth and seventh centuries. Chinese mythology also has a forest demon known as *tien-kou* (celestial dog). The Chinese characters for tien-kou are pronounced "tengu" in Japanese. Evidence also points to the tengu as being an adaptation of the Buddhist guardian deities known as *garuda,* which had human bodies with the wings and head of a bird. Like the tengu, garuda could change themselves at will into humans. The true origin of the tengu is probably a mixture of these foreign mythical beings with Japanese folklore.

The tengu portrayed in Japanese folklore, art and drama can be divided into two classes. The original bird-like tengu came to be referred to as *karasu* (crow) tengu, while the more human type with wings and a long nose were known as *konoha* tengu. The konoha tengu, with their phallic noses, were often the subject of erotic fantasy stories.

The tengu were generally under the control of a local ruler known as the *dai tengu.* Having a more human appearance than their servants, dai tengu sported long gray hair and matching beards. Holding a fan of seven feathers to signify their office, dai tengu are often pictured with various *makimono* scrolls which held the secrets of warfare.

The connection between the tengu and the martial arts of Japan dates back to around the tenth century. The most famous legend about tengu teaching the martial arts to humans concerns the great warrior known as Yoshitsune

"The exact origin of the tengu is shrouded in the mist of time and remains a mystery to this day."

Photo courtesy of John Lindsey

Tengu were often under the direction of a dai tengu (right), who normally had more human features than his followers.

Photo courtesy of John Lindsey

This 1843 print depicts the mythical figure known as Kido Maru being taught magic by a collection of tengu.

Minamoto. Yoshitsune's family fought during the Heiji rebellion, only to be defeated on the battlefield by rival forces under the leadership of Taira no Kiyomori. As a captive of the opposing clan, the young Yoshitsune was exiled to a monastery to be raised as a priest. Living high in the mountains north of Kyoto, Yoshitsune soon grew weary of the monastic life and wished only to seek his revenge against the Taira clan. Sneaking out at night, Yoshitsune would train in the forest with a *bokken* (wooden sword) he had made.

It was on one of these nightly training sessions that he was noticed by a tengu who lived in the forests around the monastery. Yoshitsune's activities were brought to the attention of the dai tengu named Sojobo, who soon appeared before the youth. Impressed by Yoshitsune's desire for revenge, Sojobo agreed to teach the youth the secrets of warfare, especially the tengu's special sword method. The dai tengu did so not out of sympathy, but rather because he knew Yoshitsune would be an instigator of a war which would bring death and destruction to many a family. Training every night with the tengu, Yoshitsune soon became an accomplished warrior. After mastering the martial arts, he left the monastery and spent many years organizing an army which ultimately would defeat the Taira clan at the Battle of Dannoura in 1185.

The link between the martial arts and the tengu became more evident at the end of the 14th century, when the concept of formal martial schools or *ryu* came about. Up until that time, the martial arts were generally taught on a personal level and were not recognized as a formal tradition. With the introduction of the ryu concept, it was important for the schools to establish a historical lineage to legitimize their styles. So it was that the tengu, which were generally accepted as being real, became connected to several ryu by supposedly instructing the founders of some styles. This historical event was normally noted in the ryu's makimono scrolls, which were passed on by the heads of the ryu to their successors. Many of these scrolls illustrate the ryu's fighting methods and feature tengu as opponents.

The tengu were also closely tied to the ninja warriors of feudal Japan. This was due in part to the willingness of the ninja families to be associated with these mountain goblins. By playing up the connection to the tengu, the ninja could make good use of the fears and superstitions of their enemies. Thus, stories of ninja flying through the air or becoming invisible served to further convince the samurai that armed encounters with these warriors should be avoided at all costs.

The tengu connection to ninjutsu was originally a result of stories of these goblins being closely associated with the mountain warrior priests known as *yamabushi*. These holy men of the mountains played an important role in the formation of ninjutsu, and their link to the tengu was naturally carried over.

The yamabushi's connection with the tengu dates back to the 13th century, when stories of tengu turning themselves into these mountain priests became popular. The yamabushi lived in the mountains in search of the magical powers said to be found there. Naturally, it was thought that the yamabushi had made frequent contacts with the tengu, who were known for their knowledge of the supernatural. Tengu were also known to be able to transform themselves into humans, and it was thought that many yamabushi were in fact tengu attempting to make trouble with the local villagers. This view of the yamabushi's connection to the tengu became very popular during the Edo period (1600-1867), when many individuals claiming to be priests were actually charlatans out to make money by deceiving the public.

The tengu were also known as sworn enemies of Buddhism. Often kidnapping priests and leaving them tied to the tops of trees, the tengu would use their magical powers to implant ideas of greed, pride and hatred into their captives' minds. They were also known to have hypnotized priests into thinking they were dining on a delicious meal, when in truth they were eating manure.

Priests who developed spiritual power only to let it inflate their own ego were accused of being under the control of the tengu. Such priests were said to be in the transmigratory realm known as *tengudo* until they recovered.

The character of the tengu began to change at the end of the 13th century. No longer strictly stereotyped as evil, some tengu became good-natured and worked to benefit mankind. These good tengu even became the protectors of various Buddhist temples, especially those located in the mountains, while also instructing the priests in the more esoteric rites and doctrines of Buddhism. Some temples even claim to have scrolls written by tengu. The writing has never been identified as belonging to any known human language, and thus has never been translated.

To a well-educated individual, the tengu simply appear to be the figment of a superstitious people. Even so, it must be stressed that when people believe in something so much that it influences their lives, then it has become real, if not just in their imagination. In the Western world, Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny are just as real to a four-year-old as the tengu were to the ancient Japanese.

According to feudal Japanese legends, tengu such as the one above taught martial arts to both the ninja and the samurai.

Today in Japan, the majority of the martial arts have become methods for development of self-discipline and no longer stress combative techniques. Thus the tengu have little in common with today's martial arts, where matches on the field of battle have been replaced by matches on the mats of sports arenas. Alive only in the minds of the young, the tengu have become an endangered mythical species.

About the Author: John Lindsey is a ninjutsu stylist and freelance writer based in Houston.

NEW
Advanced Tonfa: Japanese Weapon of Self-Defense
by Tadashi Yamashita
Weapons expert Tadashi Yamashita, known for the speed and fluidity of his karate and weapons techniques, explains all the details of the tonfa, with hundreds of step-by-step photos illustrating the advanced techniques. This definitive book covers advanced gripping and flipping, then goes on to include block and counter techniques, the pinan yodan karate kata adapted for tonfa, a traditional kata, kumite, self-defense, and contemporary tonfajutsu.
Please use order form on page 80
Code No. 456
$9.95
OHARA PUBLICATIONS, INC.
1813 Victory Place. P.O. Box 7728. Burbank. CA 91510-7728

HURLEY STRETCH RACK

TO ORDER CALL TOLL FREE
1-800-872-1044

IN VIRGINIA CALL COLLECT 703-342-7550

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____
STATE _____ ZIP _____
PHONE ( ) _____
CREDIT CARD # _____ EXP. DATE _____

☐ MONEY ORDERS ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ VISA

Allow 2 to 4 Weeks Delivery–Personal Checks held 15 Days

CREDIT CARD ORDERS 1-800-872-1044 (7 Days)
VIRGINIA RESIDENTS 1-703-342-7550 Call Collect

☐ HD-3000 $194.95 – $15.00 S & H
☐ HS-1000 $129.95 – $10.00 S & H

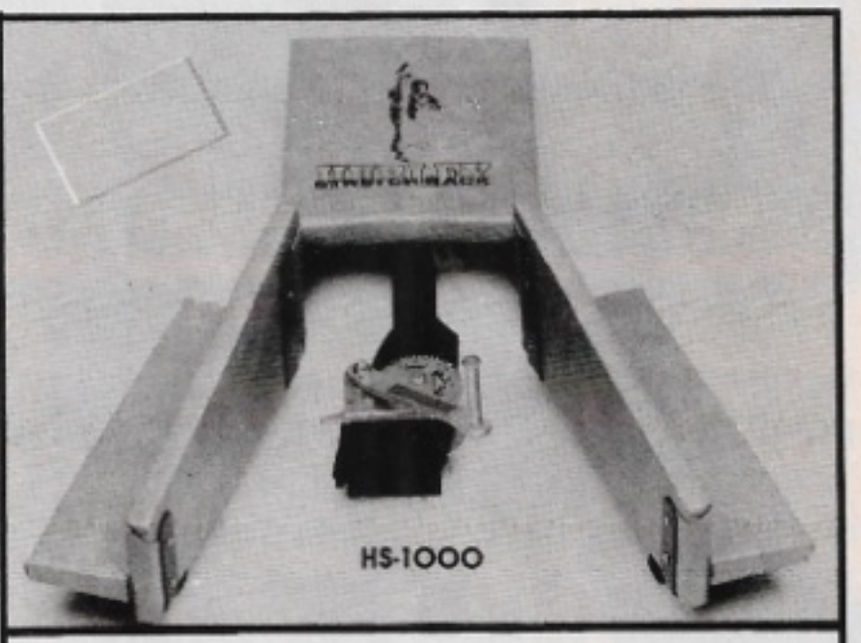
Carson Hurley Enterprises, Inc.
2945 Orange Avenue, N.E.
P. O. Box 12783
Roanoke, Va. 24028 BB

Especially designed to improve your flexibility for all sports and art form such as: Karate, Gymnastics, Dance and Aerobics.

The Hurley Stretch Rack will help you acquire incredible flexibility in half the time.

Both models come completely assembled and with 2 years warranty on workmanship and materials.

CALL NOW
1-800-872-1044
FREE BROCHURE
OR
CREDIT CARD
ORDERS



The HD-3000 has a special brake clutch crank, which automatically holds any position and releases by turning handle.